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An ancient helper for making a baby

Many parents swear by acupuncture for increased fertility

CORI HOWARD

After more than a year of trying to get pregnant, Vancouverite Karen Racey found herself having a *Sex and the City* moment. Like the TV character Charlotte, she was having trouble conceiving. But unlike Charlotte, Racey was trying for her second child after an easy first pregnancy. Still, she was in her mid-30s and didn't want it to take too long. Then, just as Charlotte did and a growing number of women in North America are doing, Racey sought out an acupuncture clinic. "I had heard about acupuncture through friends," says Racey, now 36. "And treating the whole body as a system made sense to me." She started going to weekly sessions and was pregnant within two months. "I have no proof it was the acupuncture that did it," she acknowledges. "But I was a lot more relaxed and at ease with things. I felt really healthy and in tune with my body. And if nothing else, my trips to the clinic were like going to the spa."

There are few scientific studies on the efficacy of acupuncture in treating infertility. Several, though, do indicate acupuncture increases blood flow to the reproductive organs, which could improve egg quality. Those studies also suggest acupuncture helps balance hormones that can even out menstrual cycles, and that there are more positive pregnancy tests after acupuncture for in vitro fertilization (IVF) patients. Despite the expected resistance of Western doctors to acupuncture as a legitimate fertility treatment, women are increasingly turning to it as a way to "optimize" and balance their bodies before fertility treatments or, quite simply, to help them get pregnant naturally. "It's not magic," says Lorne Brown, who runs Acubalance Wellness Centre, a Vancouver clinic specializing in Chinese medicine and fertility. "But we can turn back your reproductive clock. I can't obviously make anyone younger, but biologically there's a chance. With age, blood flow is impeded, and acupuncture has been shown to improve blood flow."

At Brown's clinic, the breakdown between women coming in to prepare for ordinary conception and for IVF is 50-50. Over the past four years, he says, he has helped more than 200 women get pregnant, and he regularly consults with acupuncturists, doctors and patients across Canada. "This isn't anything new," he says. "I'm using a technique that is thousands of years old. It's a common saying in Chinese medicine to nourish the soil before planting the seed."

According to this philosophy, the three months prior to conception are crucial because they determine the health of the sperm and egg that will eventually become the child. Using a combination of acupuncture and Chinese herbs, Brown's first step is to regulate a woman's menstrual cycle. Using the meridians, or points on the body that Chinese medicine teaches are each related to an organ system, Brown inserts needles into any of those 800 places to try to eliminate PMS, clotting and pain, and to ensure a regular 29-day cycle. He also uses acupuncture to increase blood flow and balance hormones.

Although he doesn't see a lot of men, Brown says when they do come in, it's often to prepare their bodies for intra-cytoplasmic sperm injections, a process that involves injecting the sperm into the egg. It's the step beyond IVF, whereby the sperm and egg meet up in a petri dish. Brown says he treats both man and woman for three months and then advises them to try to conceive naturally for a few months. In four out of five cases, he says, these couples conceive naturally.

When they don't, and decide to go for IVF, his treatment improves their chances of success, he says. But he warns that it can sometimes take longer than six months to get results. "Most people don't have the patience for acupuncture because the fertility clinics are pushing and saying, 'You're old, you're old.' And they take Western medical advice over ours. But people who stick it out with us tend to be successful."

One physician who's been sold on the effectiveness of acupuncture is Victoria fertility specialist Dr. Stephen Hudson. Five years ago, he was a skeptic. But then his daughter's boyfriend gave him a book about Chinese medicine, and pretty soon he found himself studying acupuncture in his spare time. Until recently, he himself would perform acupuncture on his patients at the Victoria Fertility Centre, but he is now too busy to do most of it. "Acupuncture is like resetting your thermostat," he says. "We work on certain points of the body to improve blood flow and reproductive health. We encourage our patients to see a traditional Chinese doctor if there's something we can't identify. Then we can work together." Especially for women planning IVF or women not ovulating regularly, Hudson recommends trying acupuncture before starting fertility drugs, given the accompanying risks such as multiple pregnancies.

Brown clients Cathy Jones and her husband, Robert, spent 10 months trying to get pregnant before trying acupuncture. Within three months, she was expecting. Now, the 36-year-old has a baby girl of three months. "I doubt it was just the acupuncture," she says. "But it made it happen faster and helped me have a good pregnancy, a straightforward labour, and a healthy baby."